

Sing with Understanding
Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath
Broadman Press, 1980

The Metrical Psalm
French and Continental

Just as Luther gave the chorale its impetus, his contemporary—the French-Swiss Reformation theologian John Calvin (1509-64)—was the guiding hand behind the metrical psalm. A more radical reformer than Luther, Calvin rejected the musical heritage of the Roman Catholic Church, including organs, choirs and man-made hymns. He advocated singing only Scripture in worship, primarily the Psalms versified like hymns so that each could be sung to a particular tune. Furthermore, in Calvin's view the metrical psalms were to be sung only in unison and without instrumental accompaniment. The result of this philosophy of church song was the production of a series of gradually enlarged psalters in French, beginning with Calvin's Strassburg *Psalter* of 1539 and continuing with other psalters published in Geneva. The process culminated with the *Genevan Psalter* of 1562, which included all 150 psalms plus the Ten Commandments and the *Nunc dimittis*. The complete *Genevan Psalter* contained 125 tunes in 110 different metrical forms.

Calvin, unlike Luther, was neither composer nor poet, but he was fortunate to have the assistance of others who did have these talents. Calvin's *Psalter* was versified in the French language by Clement Marot (ca. 1497-1544), who was succeeded several years after his death by Theodore de Beze (1519-1608). The chief musical contributor to the *Genevan Psalter* was Louis Bourgeois (ca. 1510—ca.1561), who came from Paris to be director of music at St. Peter's Cathedral at Geneva, where Calvin preached for a number of years. In keeping with a common practice of the time, Bourgeois used many first phrases of secular chansons in his *Psalter* melodies. It is uncertain just how many of the Genevan Psalter tunes were actually composed by Bourgeois and how many were derived from other sources. Bourgeois's great influence upon this work has been attested by Pratt: "To him is plainly due the individual style that sets the French Psalter apart from all others of its age."²⁹ Among the *Genevan Psalter* tunes in present-day American hymnals are:

COMMANDMENTS ("Father, we thank thee who has planted," M307)—attributed to Bourgeois but with a first line from a secular chanson.

DONNE SECOURS ("Hope of the world," L493)—a Dorian melody attributed to Bourgeois and set to Marot's version of Psalm 12.

O SEIGNEUR ("When morning guilds the skies," L545)—

OLD 100TH ("All people that on earth do dwell," B17, E21, M21; "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," B6, 7, M809)—Originally to Psalm 134; attributed to Bourgeois but with a first line from a secular chanson.

OLD 107TH ("The Lord will come and not be slow," L318, M468)—original 7, 6, 7, 6, 6, 7, 6, 7 meter changed to C.M.D. in British-American use.

OLD 124TH ("Your kingdom come, O Father, hear our prayer," L376; or GENEVA 124, "Turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish ways," M475).

OLD 134TH (or ST. MICHAEL, "Stand up and bless the Lord," B26, M16)—originally to Psalm 101 and in the metrical pattern 11, 11, 10, 4, this tune has been considerably altered in English use.

RENDEZ À DIEU ("Bread of the world in mercy broken," M323)—attributed to Bourgeois.

PSALM 42 (Comfort, comfort ye (now) my people, B77; or FREU DICH SEHR, L29; "Praise and thanks and adoration," L470)—this melody, eventually taken over into German use, was later used by Bach in seven of his cantatas.

The melodies of the *Genevan Psalter* gained extensive use in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, being spread not only in French-speaking areas but also through numerous translations in Germany, Holland, England, and Scotland, and from these lands to the American colonies. So great was the acceptance of these French Psalter tunes in Holland that their circulation there, even in our own century, is probably wider than that within their original French Protestant domain.³⁰

Early English

Just as the first psalm versions of Marot had been written while he served in the court of Francis I of France, the beginnings of the first significant English psalter also took place amid royalty. Before 1549 Thomas Sternhold (1500-1549), a servant in the courts of Henry VIII and Edward VI, published nineteen psalm versions (which he sang to ballad tunes for his own private devotions) and dedicated them to young King Edward. A second edition containing thirty-seven psalms appeared in 1549 after Sternhold's death. In 1551 his friend John Hopkins (d. 1570), a clergyman and schoolteacher from Suffolk, added seven new versions to the previous thirty-seven. By the time this English *Psalter* was completed in 1562 (the same year of completion as the *Genevan Psalter*) Hopkins had contributed more than sixty psalm versions, thus giving it its popular designation—*The Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter*.

Before the completion of the English *Psalter*, however, political-religious developments in England caused English-language psalters to be published and used also on other than English soil. After the death of Edward VI in 1553, Roman Catholic Queen Mary (known as “Bloody Mary”) succeeded to the throne. Under Mary's reign many Protestants fled from persecution to the Continent, and especially to Geneva. Editions of the *Anglo-Genevan Psalter* appeared in 1556, 1558, and 1561, the first being the initial English-language Psalter to include tunes. (Each of its fifty-one psalms had its proper tune, including some tunes reflecting Genevan influences.) The most lasting contribution from the *Anglo-Genevan Psalter* was made by William Kethe (d. c. 1593), among whose twenty-five versions in the 1561 edition was his rendition of Psalm 100, “All people that on earth do dwell” (B17, L245, M21). It was set to the tune previously used with Psalm 134 in the *Genevan Psalter*, known to English-speaking churches as OLD 100TH.

The complete English *Psalter* of 1562, which included many versions from the *Anglo-Genevan Psalter*, was actually the work of at least twelve persons, but chiefly Sternhold and Hopkins. This *Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter*, later known as the *Old Version* (to distinguish it from the 1696 *New Version* of Tate and Brady), was the official psalter of the Anglican Church until the second decade of the nineteenth century. Its metrical versions have almost completely passed out of common use today.

²⁹Waldo Selden Pratt, *The Music of the French Psalter of 1562* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939. Reprinted. New York: AMS Press, 1966), p. 62. This study, the most comprehensive treatment of the *Genevan Psalter* in English, contains all 125 tunes of the 1562 edition in modern notation.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 69.